



Voices
from the
Gaps



The Memories of Ana Calderón by Graciela Limón

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I left Lost Angeles not knowing what I would discover in the land of my childhood. When I arrived in Puerto Real (Mexico), I went to where the palapas had stood and found that in their place were condominiums and hotels. (Limón 197)

— voice of Ana Calderón

In the novel *The Memories of Ana Calderón* by Graciela Limón, the reader follows protagonist Ana through her journey toward self-realization as she struggles to negotiate between her past and the present. The journey not only focuses on the emotional terrain of Ana's character, but also navigates geographically across the border between Mexico and the United States. Limón takes the reader inwards towards the underpinnings of the American Dream through one Latina's view. Ana Calderón's exploration of the human psyche can be seen as a metaphor for the experiences of other Mexican American immigrants. Through her depiction of Ana's life, Limón touches on the many obstacles that Mexican immigrants face.

The novel begins in a thatched-hut community in Mexico where Ana's extended family has lived for generations. Like most men in the village, her father is a fisherman. Throughout the novel, Ana is plagued by her father's resentment. As a child, she was told that she had poisoned her mother's womb, preventing her mother from ever bearing a healthy son. After the death of Ana's mother, her father migrates northward with his seven children and adopted son to find work in the fields of northern Mexico. Limón's account of the Calderón family's experience as migrant workers sheds light on the harsh conditions that real migrant workers have endured. Eventually, the family escapes from their migrant camp and crosses the border. Winding their way through the desert, the Calderóns continue on past the borderlands and into Los Angeles to start a new life.

Ana's story unfolds in a Los Angeles barrio. As Ana matures, Limón highlights the struggle between her and her father over how she should live her life. This rocky relationship represents the tensions between different generations of Mexican immigrants and the struggles families often face in adapting to a new culture. Eventually, her father's resentment and unyielding control of the family force Ana to search outside her family for support.



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As Ana's character evolves and her fortunes improve, Limón highlights the fact that, for Ana, as for others, creating a new identity in the United States can be difficult. The self contains all aspects of a person's life. For Ana, she is negotiating between her traditional family heritage and the construct of individualism that is such an integral part of North American culture.

Graciela Limón's *The Memories of Ana Calderón* is an engaging chronicle of the imagined life of Ana Calderón. The story's narrative weaves between first and third person points of view, allowing readers to hear both the triumphant, but often scared, voice of Ana and the casual, yet caring, voice of an outside observer. Limón's writing is exquisite and captivating.

This novel could be classified as a rags-to-riches account or simply a coming-of-age story, but Limón goes far beyond these stock story-lines: she explores subjects as varied as Mexican folklore, the American Dream, retellings of Biblical stories and Oedipal themes. Ana's life acts as a focal point from which to embark on these psychological journeys between physical borders and conflicting identities. Like Ana's reconciliation of cultural and feminine adversities, Limón puts together a novel that incorporates elements of both oral and written traditions in its attempts to explain human inclinations.

Graciela Limón is an educator and author whose novels deal with the issues of multiculturalism and Latina identity. Limón was born in Los Angeles on August 2, 1938, to a working class family. Her parents had emigrated to California from Mexico. At an early age, she aspired to becoming a writer. She put herself through school and acquired a Ph.D. from the University of California in 1975. She became a professor of U.S. Hispanic literature and Chair of the Department of Chicana and Chicano Studies at Loyola Marymount University, Los Angeles, in 1980.

Limón began writing fiction in the early 1990s with *Maria de Belen: The Autobiography of an Indian Woman* (1990). Other novels by Limón include: "Erased Faces" (2001), *The Day of the Moon* (1999), *Song of the Hummingbird* (1996) and *In Search of Bernabé* (1993). *In Search of Bernabé* received the Chicano Literature Award, a Before Columbus Foundation Book Award, and a Critics' Choice Award from the *New York Times Book Review*. Limón has recently retired from 35 years of teaching. She plans to work on her writing and to continue advocating for social change and awareness.

Reviewed by Jody Sather